

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter to President Obama on November 14, 2012.

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), allow me to wish you a safe and productive visit to East Asia this week. During your historic trip to Burma, we respectfully urge you to raise issues of religious freedom and the abuses that continue to arise from ongoing ethnic and communal violence, particularly in the Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states of Burma.

We recognize Burma's recent changes and the positive political opening they promise. The "flickers of progress" you cited last year in announcing increased U.S. engagement have grown brighter as the civilian government in Burma emerges from decades of military rule. Yet, it is our contention that Burma's democratic future is threatened by the continued violence and discrimination experienced by ethnic and religious minorities.

The situation faced by the Rohingya Muslim minority over the past six months is particularly acute. They have been targets of appalling communal violence in Burma and the denial of asylum protection in Bangladesh. Over a thousand have died, tens of thousands live in squalid camps, and humanitarian assistance is difficult to deliver. Worse, Burmese security forces and local officials are often complicit in the violence and discrimination faced by the Rohingya.

Rohingya in Burma are also denied citizenship and face ongoing religious freedom restrictions, including limits on the number of Muslims who can gather in one place and restrictions on Muslim marriage ceremonies in certain villages. Authorities have denied building permits for mosques and destroyed schools, religious centers, and mosques operating without permits. Furthermore, according to recent Rohingya refugees, the military has offered enticements to Rohingya Muslims to convert to Buddhism through charity, bribes, promises of jobs, or schooling for their children.

There are similar stories of persecution, violence, and human rights abuses against ethnic minority Chin Christians in Kachin and Shan states, who continue to face ongoing military campaigns after the breakdown of ceasefire negotiations. Chin churches are destroyed, religious services are banned, pastors are targeted and killed, and the military forces religious adherents to build Buddhist temples and shrines.

The alarming state of affairs faced by Burma's ethnic nationalities reveals how much farther Burma's new government must go in advancing reform and protecting universal human rights. Under military rule, Burma was one of the world's worst human rights and religious freedom violators. Under civilian rule, it has yet to put that image behind it and fully affirm its ethnic and religious diversity by upholding human rights, including religious freedom, for everyone.

We commend you and your administration for actively encouraging political reforms and democratic freedoms in Burma. The end of ongoing human rights abuses, ethnic and sectarian violence, and the full integration of ethnic and religious minorities into Burma's political and economic future remains, as stated by U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell, the "defining challenge" of Burma's future. We hope your visit will spur additional democratic reforms that will bring about both the full protection of vulnerable Rohingya and Chin minorities and the full realization of their religious freedoms.

Sincerely,

Katrina Lantos Swett

Chair

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